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Reconfiguring Northeast and its Emerging Significance in Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

India's Northeast comprises of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The partition of British India in 1947 resulted to a great disadvantage for the Northeast as the region became landlocked with the emergence of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The region also experienced a number of insurgency movements that resulted in underdevelopment and economic stagnation. The adoption of Look East Policy in 1991 by the government of India transformed India's outlook towards the Northeast. Large scale Investments followed and Northeast came to be viewed as a bridge connecting Southeast Asian countries. The up gradation of the Look East Policy into Act East Policy in 2014 provided further impetus to the development of Northeast. Thus, from a peripheral region, the Northeast has emerged at the centre stage of Indian foreign policy. The region has been considered as crucial for the success of sub-regional organizations such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh, Bhutan India and Nepal (BBIN). The emerging political dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and China's forays in India's eastern neighbourhood has made the region geo-politically and geo-strategically significant. The paper will study the emergence of Northeast as a significant factor in Indian foreign policy. It will also analyse the role of India's eastern neighbours in the development of Northeast.

Keywords: *Northeast India, Indian Foreign Policy, Act East Policy, Regional Connectivity, ASEAN, Geostrategic Significance.*

Introduction

The Northeast, considered as the "Gateway to Southeast Asia" comprises of eight Indian states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. These eight states together cover an area of 2, 62, 179 sq. km, constituting 8 per cent of the country's total geographical area and accounting for around 4 per cent of the country's total population. The region shares a long international boundary of around 5,812 km (96 per cent) with its neighbouring countries, with China and Bhutan in the north, Myanmar in the east, Nepal in the west, Bangladesh in the south and west (De 2022: 80). The NER is the bridgehead of India's connectivity with Southeast and East Asia.

The Northeast is connected to rest of India by the Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck), a narrow strip of land (22 km) flanked by Nepal on the north and Bangladesh to the south, thereby increasing India's vulnerabilities (Ghosh 2023). During British India's pre-partition period, the Northeast enjoyed flourishing trade relations with its eastern and southern neighbours at it had access to the sea via the Bay of Bengal. The partition of British India and the subsequent creation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh in 1971) disrupted this age old trade relations and cultural connection which the region earlier had with its eastern and southern neighbours.

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The partition not only made the Northeast 'landlocked' but also isolated, at least economically, from the rest of India and gradually surrendered to an inward-looking economic regime with broken transportation networks. At present, the NER's high transportation cost negates its advantages of having international borders. The region imported almost every consumer goods from outside the region. The absence of adequate institutional and physical infrastructures, both national and international, coupled with insurgency, in part has slowed down the NER's development process (De 2022: 77).

The vulnerability and disadvantage of being 'landlocked' has remained to this date with Muhammad Yunus, the chief advisor of the Bangladeshi interim government as recently as 2025 stated that "the eastern part of India known as the "Seven Sisters" is landlocked. They have no access to the ocean. We are the only guardians of the ocean in this region. This opens up huge possibilities" (Chakraborty 2025). The statement drew sharp criticism from Indian political circles.

Review of Literature

Sanjay Hazarika in his work, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast* (2018) discusses how the Northeast has evolved from a land of insurgent outfits to a new era of peace and development. Dilip Gogoi in his work, *Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions* (2020), analyses the growing significance of Northeast as a borderland region and its impaction in inter-regional trade and commerce. Shristi Pukrem in her paper *Act East Policy: Northeast India as a bridgehead to ASEAN* (2020) analyses the central role of NER as a gateway to the Southeast Asian nations. A large part of the previous work has mainly dealt with policies and projects. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to reconfigure the significance NER in the context of Indian foreign policy.

India's Look East Policy and the Growing Importance of Northeast

As the Indian economy plummeted to a new low in the 1990s owing to the financial crisis which resulted primarily as the consequence of the Gulf war, the Indian government under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to adopt the Look East Policy (LEP) to develop cordial relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN). As the Cold War was over and most of the ASEAN countries were performing financially well, the government of India felt the necessity to connect itself with these countries. As Northeast provided India's physical connectivity to the Southeast Asian countries via Myanmar, the region became an intrinsic part of India's new LEP framework. The Northeast was rebranded as a region overflowing with natural resources and geo-strategic potential which could significantly contribute to natural as well as regional economic development (Maitra 2025).

The Northeast and India's Act East Policy

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rebranded India's previously known Look East Policy into Act East Policy (AEP) with the aim of reinvigorating and accelerating India's eastward engagement (Saha 2025). He placed the Northeastern region at the heart of this vision and referred it as "*Suvarnabhumi*" (land of gold) and based it on the twin pillars of peace and development (Suresh 2025). A key objective of the AEP was to transform the previously perceived 'landlocked' Northeastern region into a gateway for India's trade, connectivity, and cultural ties with ASEAN nations (Karmakar 2025).

Another important objective of India's AEP was to unlock and harness the Northeast region's vast economic potential particularly its abundant natural resources, renewal energy potential, and rich biodiversity. These assets not only presented significant opportunities for growth but also opened doors to investment in key sectors such as energy, agriculture, renewable energy, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing (Haokip, 2025).

Under India's AEP, the Northeastern region therefore remained on top priority of the Indian government. It has significantly increased the budgetary allocation for the Northeast by 300 per cent from

36,108 crore in 2014-15 to over Rs. 1 lakh crore in 2024-25 including welfare initiatives (Karmakar 2025). In terms of infrastructure, there has been an increase from 96 crores to 2491 crores improving rail, road connectivity, and air and inland waterways as an alternate mode of transportation and to facilitate trade with neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal and thereafter to access global markets (Suresh 2025). Government data shows that more than 10,000 km of highways have been built, eight new airports set up, and over 800 km of railway tracks were laid in this period. Connectivity projects to link the Northeast with ASEAN nations via roads and waterways were fast-tracked, with some even becoming operational (Karmakar 2025).

One of the main emphases of the AEP has been geared towards enhancing the region's connectivity with its neighbouring countries. Initiatives to create an integrated economic corridor linking India's Northeast with East Asia has been achieved through infrastructural projects such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative Myanmar (Haokip 2025). The trilateral highway will connect Moreh (Manipur) with Mae Sot (Thailand) via Myanmar will enable connectivity with other parts of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India has already proposed extension of this highway to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

The Northeast is the only region in India whose development is the specific mandate of a Union government ministry. In 2001, a Cabinet-Level Department for Development of the Northeastern Region was set up to fast-track economic development of the area, which was elevated to a full-fledged Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (often abbreviated as MDoNER) in 2004 (Maitra 2025). The MDoNER basically implements various schemes, including schemes of NLCPR and Special Packages through state governments of NER and some central ministries (Kokho 2022: 66).

The government of India has taken steps to strengthen road networks in the NER under the National Highways Development Project (NHDP) and Special Accelerated Road Development Programme in Northeast schemes. Under Bharatmala Pariyojana, 5,301 km of roads in the NER have been approved for improvement; out of this, 3,246 km of road for development of the Economic Corridor in the Northeast. In 2018, the 9.15 km long Dhola-Sadiya Bridge, India's longest river bridge, connecting Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, was inaugurated (De 2022: 82). The government of Assam on 20 December, 2025 had inaugurated the new terminal building of the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati, Assam which is expected to provide connectivity to many Southeast Asian countries.

On 3-4 February 2018, the first Global Investors Summit (known as Advantage Assam 1.0) was held at Guwahati to showcase Assam as a premier investment hub for Southeast Asia. The Advantage Assam 2.0 held on 25-26 February 2025 brought together leading global investors, with the aim of positioning Assam and the Northeast as a whole as a major global investment hub. The event underscored the region's increasing relevance on the world stage, highlighting its strategic importance as a center of sustainable development and economic progress (Haokip 2025).

On May 23-24, 2025, the Rising North East Investors Summit was inaugurated by PM Modi. The Summit highlighted the NER as a land of opportunity, attracting global and domestic investment, and bringing together key stakeholders, investors, and policymakers on a single platform. Delegations from over 80 countries attended the event. In the inaugural ceremony of the summit, Modi highlighted that over the past decade, Rs. 21,000 crore has been invested in the Northeast's education sector. After the event, the region drew an unprecedented Rs. 4.3 Lakh Crore in investment interest, setting the stage for the Northeast to become India's next economic power house (PIB 2025).

A significant aspect of the India's AEP is to strengthen and promote cultural relations with neighbouring countries. In this regard, the Northeast has long-standing historical and cultural connections with ASEAN countries, particularly with nations like Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. These ties, which date back centuries, are rooted in shared traditions, religions, and customs (Haokip 2025). Through

AEP, the Indian government has promoted cultural festivals and academic exchanges showcasing the rich cultural heritage of Northeast India.

The Northeast has also emerged as a hub of festivals. The Annual Hornbill festival held at Nagaland attracts tourists from different regions of the world. The Tawang Mahotsav held in Arunachal Pradesh to celebrate the birth anniversary of Gautam Buddha draws crowds from different regions, particularly Buddhists. The Cherry Blossom festival held in Shillong has also received support from the government of Japan. Shillong has emerged as hub for musical concerts. All the above mentioned programmes have received support from the respective state governments of the region.

Northeast and the Role of Neighbours

The role of India's neighbouring countries has been significant for the development of the Northeast. Sub-regional groupings such as the BIMSTEC consisting of countries like India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal have ushered in regional cooperation. Through BIMSTEC, India has revived ancient trade-routes and enhanced transportation and infrastructure connectivity between the northeastern region and Southeast Asia. By enhancing trade routes, connectivity, and energy co-operation, BIMSTEC holds the potential to transform India's northeastern region into a thriving hub for trade and investment.

Bangladesh

The geographical location of Bangladesh has been advantageous to attract international cargo ships as it is positioned besides the Bay of Bengal comprising two natural ports: Chittagong and Mongla. In 2018, Bangladesh granted permission to India to use its Chittagong and Mongla ports for transit movement of Indian goods through waterways, rail, road or multimodal transport in its territory. This alternative connectivity has been expected to boost the development of India's Northeast by increasing trade volumes and reducing logistic costs (Basu Ray Choudhury 2022: 47). The 'landlocked' Northeast's stronger connectivity with Bangladesh can create an alternative gateway which is essential for the region's development and progress.

Bhutan

The government of Bhutan's decision to establish a "Mindfulness" city at Gelephu will transform the economic scenario of southern Bhutan and western Assam. The proposed international airport at Gelephu will help passengers from Assam to easily travel to Southeast Asian countries. The government of India has also decided to set up two railway lines, the Banarhat-Samsi and the Gelephu-Kokrajhar connecting Bhutan. The government of India has also inaugurated the first India-Bhutan Integrated Check post at Darranga in Assam on 7 November 2024 (The Hindu 2024).

Myanmar

Myanmar holds immense strategic value for India's northeastern region. The country provides India with an alternative route for trade with Southeast Asia, which is crucial for integrating the northeastern states into the broader regional economic framework. The KMMTP envisages linking Lawngtlai in India's Northeastern state of Mizoram via road and the River Kaladan in the deep-sea port at Sittwe in Myanmar's Rakhine province (Hlaing 2020: 143). Myanmar's location also provides India with a key access point to the Bay of Bengal and vital maritime trade routes. The India-Myanmar relationship, therefore, holds significant potential for boosting the region's connectivity and economic growth.

Japan's Role in the Development of Northeast

Japan has played an important role in the development of Northeast. India-Japan cooperation received a big push with the two prime ministers signing an agreement in 2017 to establish the India-Japan Act East Forum which was conceived of as a platform for bilateral co-operation. Japan is presently engaged in building road connectivity projects in Northeast along with energy, water supply, health, irrigation, environmental projects

and people-to-people exchanges (Keshavan 2020). Japan's connectivity projects in the NER have promoted greater integration within the NER. It has also enhanced India-Southeast Asia trade.

As part of India's AEP and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, the latter has provided three loans to India totaling Yen 43 billion for the development of NER. The loans relate to the development of the Umiam-Umtru stage -111 hydroelectric power station in Meghalaya, construction of a bridge linking Dhubri in Assam and Phulbari in Meghalaya and for tree planting in Tripura (MEA 2018). In the above aspects, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been the primary government agency responsible for administering Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) in India.

Conclusion

From a 'troubled periphery' experiencing insurgency and chronic underdevelopment, the Northeast has emerged as an important pivot in India's foreign policy. The region has emerged as a vital connecting space for India's regional connectivity ambitions. India's approach towards the NER drastically changed with the adoption of India's Look East Policy in 1991. Since then, the region has marched towards greater heights of development and progress. The further up gradation of Look East Policy into Act East Policy in 2014 has brought more investments and positive outlook to the region. The NER has been crucial for the success of the sub-regional groups such as the BIMSTEC and BBIN. Further, the region has become more geo-politically and geo-strategically significant as the result of the political dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and the recent political turmoil in India's eastern neighbourhood. Despite certain bottlenecks, the Northeast's abundant natural resources, if harnessed carefully could easily transform the region into a manufacturing and service industries hub. Its oil and natural gas, rich mineral deposits, agro-horticultural and forest resources, and hydroelectric potential have been attraction for industrial houses. The region has also emerged as a tourist hub for its colourful festivals.

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